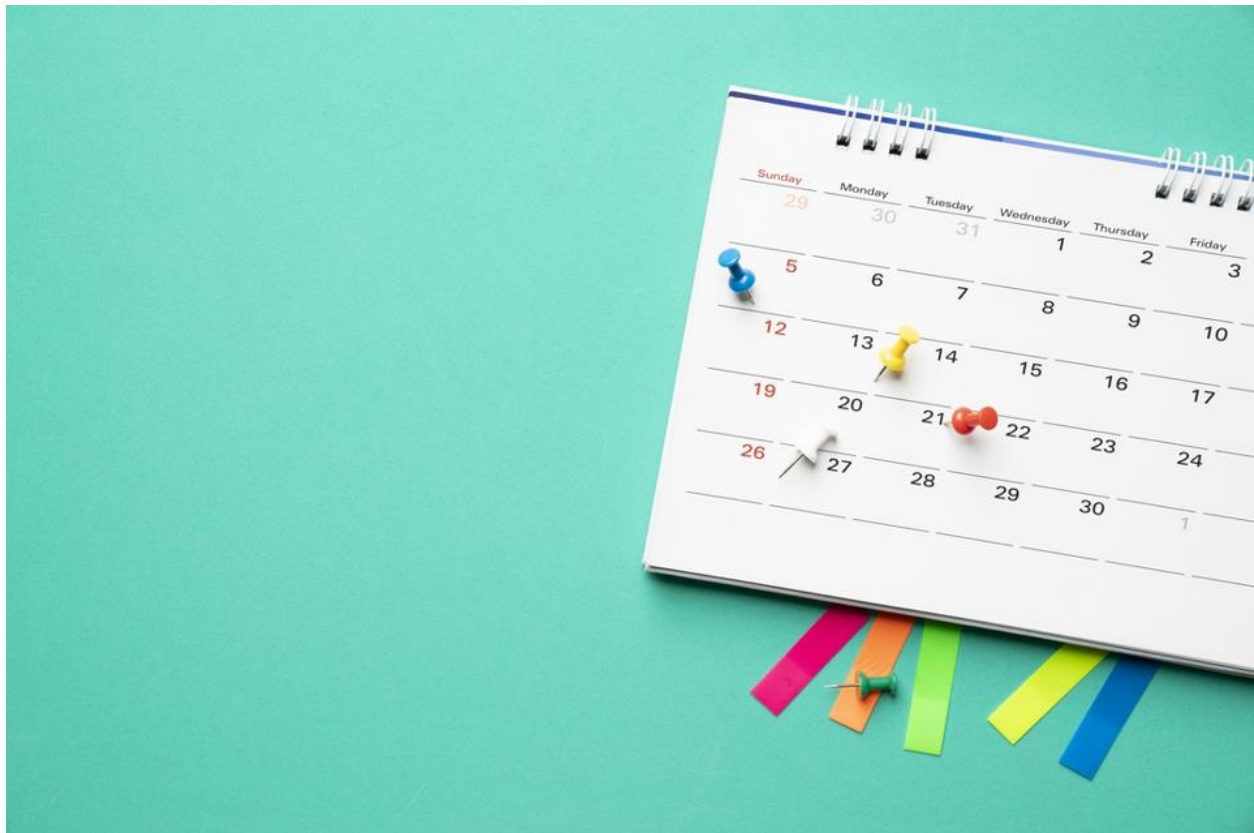


One Progress “Metric” You Need To Get Rid Of

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Imagine yourself leading a project check-in meeting, or what I call “project control meetings.” The purpose of the session is to get an update on your project’s progress with task updates reported by your team members. One by one, they report on their progress, many of them giving you a benchmark of their status in percentages. It’s a common method many of us communicate status - personally and professionally. The problem is any percentage you or I quote is arbitrary.

While you might be pleased to hear someone is 75 percent finished with their task – when you stop to think about it, what does that really mean? Teresa Lynch of Comcast is someone I truly admire in the world of project management; she understands project management like few I've encountered, and she does it right. I can guarantee Teresa would never let any of her team members get away with telling her they're 50, 60, or 70 percent done with an activity.

Here's why: "I could tell you that I'm 99 percent done with my PhD," Teresa says. "Now what I haven't told you is that I'm never going to be done, because I did my PhD work fifteen years ago and stopped. I'm never going to go back and complete it. So, telling me you're 99-percent complete doesn't help me. I need to know *when* you're going to be done. That's the most important thing that I need to know."

Teresa is exactly right. "Percent complete" is a worthless measurement. It is dangerous in the hands of an inexperienced team member and can be used to obfuscate in the hands of an experienced but less than honorable team member. Unfortunately, some project management software tools require the use of percent complete. However, that does not mean you need to encourage nor depend on this kind of reporting from your team as a project manager.

This method of measurement presents two major issues. First, it doesn't tell us when the task will actually be finished. Even more detrimental, it doesn't drive accountability, which is so important in a matrix environment. As project managers in today's matrix environment, we rarely have the power to incentivize or penalize, so we're left to rely on our team holding themselves accountable.

Consider the following approaches to a task status update:

- I started it on November 15, and I'm going to finish it in three more days.
- I started it on November 15, and I'm going to finish it on November 20.
- I started it on November 15 and am 50 percent complete.

The first two responses give you a completion date; the third does not. You could be 50 percent complete for three more days or three more years. The first two responses give me a commitment. The third does not because percent complete tells us nothing about the future! As the project manager, this lack of clarity on *when* a task will be completed precludes you from accurately predicting when subsequent tasks—contingent on the completion of this task—can start and ultimately when the project will be done. Increase accountability and effectiveness amongst your team by doing away with meaningless percentages.

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